



### Planning Ahead for Observations: A Voice from the Field

*Robert Hammonds, assistant principal at Letcher County Central High School, a 2016 School of Distinction, discusses how a principal's fall semester planning ensures on-going collaboration and year-round improvement cycles.*

**Q: How does a teacher's professional growth plan (goals and strategies) inform the upcoming observation cycle in your school?**

**RH:** After our teachers have completed the self-reflection, we collaborate to write the Professional Growth Plan (PGP) goals and ensure they are tied to the [Kentucky Framework for Teaching](#). For example, if a teacher wants to hone student engagement (3c) skills as a goal, he or she may want to focus on learning and incorporating Kagan, Marzano, or Buel-type strategies into their lessons. Tying the focus of the goal or instructional strategy to the framework allows my observations and feedback to be easily tied to the rubric within the framework. Even walk-throughs and lesson plans are easily documented to determine if the teacher is moving toward reaching their PGP goal. To me, the idea behind the Professional Growth Goal is to give the instructor a chance to practice the strategies they need to become more effective so that student learning progresses.

**Q: How are you strategic in your observation planning calendar so that teachers have time to learn and grow from observation feedback conversations?**

**RH:** Our district's certified evaluation plan (CEP) is one that lends itself to maximizing observation time but allows for growth. Our system is set up so that an administrator will complete a mini-observation before the peer observes. Both the administrator observation and at least one peer observation are completed before Christmas.

The second semester, an administrator will complete another mini, then the full. Personally, I have found that after observing a teacher the first time, the teacher and I are able to determine next steps for growth that includes the PGP goal, but also might include another area that the teacher wants to improve. The relationship with the peer observer, then, allows for time during the first semester to work on these skills in a non-evaluative, collaborative setting. During this time, I think it is imperative to do some quick visits to lend support and check progress in the classroom. Typically, the second semester is the time when the teacher is more intensely practicing the targeted skills.

**Q: What supports for teachers have worked well for your school?**

**RH:** I use the expertise within my building as much as I can because I believe that our classroom teachers are the experts. I try to schedule time for teachers to go out into the building and visit other classrooms, so that conversations are focused on instruction and ways we can all be more effective. If I have a teacher who wants to learn more about using 'stations' effectively, then I make suggestions on who they could observe. This means I really have to know the teachers and their strengths well, which comes from spending lots of time in classrooms. Other times, teachers request to observe a particular teacher for this same reason. This practice

allows for teachers to see someone else in action and have conversations about trying new strategies in their own classrooms.

Teachers observing other teachers is more powerful than me, or anyone else, just telling them what to do. They learn more from observing each other and the conversations that take place afterwards than I could ever know or share with them. It takes the pressure off of me, too, to be the 'holder of all the knowledge.' Again, the expertise is already in the building; it's just a matter of connecting the teachers and allowing them to have the time and space to learn from each other.

**Q: How do you plan to streamline informal and formal observation evidence, and possibly even walk-through evidence, so that you aren't overwhelmed by the process and all of the data?**

**RH:** I really like the [Mike Rutherford](#) approach of visiting classrooms and having that 30 seconds or 5 minute conversation as one way to streamline. I want to be out and visible and see as much as I can, so when I see a great lesson or part of a lesson, I let the teacher know right then or later that day. Face-to-face conversations with the teachers, I think, are the most effective way to provide feedback.

I learned really early that I cannot possibly observe every aspect of teaching in any single observation. Therefore, for me, it is important to visit classrooms often and at different times for each teacher. Our conversations may include changes in planning practices and what they are learning in their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). To me, that's the easiest way to gather 'evidence' in planning and preparation practices, as well as their professional responsibilities. Evidence for Domains 1 and 4 are not always easy to observe in the classrooms, and this, along with observations, gives me a good perspective of all four domains in the framework.

**Q: If you were talking to a brand new principal about planning for observations, what three pieces of advice would you give?**

**RH:**

1. **Be organized beforehand** and schedule all of the mini and full observations at the beginning of the year, even if your district uses 'unannounced' observations. The schedule may have to change, but at least you are initially prepared and won't be as likely to be under-the-wire in March.
2. **Be specific in your feedback to teachers** and make sure that expectations are transparent. It works best if the expectations can be created collaboratively with the teacher.
3. **Let the data drive the instruction;** analyze student benchmark (or other classroom assessment) data with teachers and pay close attention to how instruction is differentiated based on this information. Find those teachers who are experts at this practice and use their expertise within your building to grow those skills within your faculty.

*[Robert Hammonds](#) was a participant in [KDE's Principal Partnership Project \(P3\)](#) and [KVEC's Appalachian Leadership Lab in 2015-16](#). To see how these planning processes connect to and demonstrate the Principal Performance Standards (PPS), review PPS 1: Instructional Leadership, 3: Human Resources Management, and 4: Organizational Management.*

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